

THE MADNESS OF DEMOCRACY – A SPIRITUAL DISEASE

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Dostoevsky's The Demons tells the story of a revolution within the context of a small village and a handful of personalities. The strange mix of philosophy and neurosis, crowd psychology and fashionable disdain for tradition all come together in the madness of a bloodbath. It is a 19th century Helter Skelter that presciently predicted the century to come. Our own version of the same sickness plays out with less bloodshed though with similar passion. This article attempts to describe that passion. I have termed it the "sin of democracy," the notion that the universe is devoid of hierarchy and that all things, ourselves included, are rightly described as equal. This is the fourth appearance [with editing] of this article which indicates that my mind is frequently drawn back to its observations. It bears repeating.

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Healing the Centurion's servant by Paolo Veronese, 16th century. Photo: dustoffthebible.com

Jesus' encounter with the Roman Centurion (Matt. 8:5-13) is one of the least *modern* experiences in all of Scripture. Of all the stories in the New Testament, this one would be the most difficult to repeat in our culture. In our world, we ourselves are our only authority – we are neither over anyone else nor subject to any. We are filled with the spirit of democracy, and, as such, despise the *Kingdom* of God.

The world of kings and rulers began to collapse at the very time that nation-states began their rise. In 1534, Henry VIII of England repudiated any authority greater than himself with regard to the Church of England. A little over a century later, Parliament followed his example and overthrew the King himself and beheaded him. The same fate met the king of France 150 years later. The march of modern progress has meant death to tyrants.

Except that it has not. When Henry refused to recognize the Pope's authority, he made himself a "Pope." With every advance and repudiation of authority, authority itself does not disappear – it simply becomes more universalized. Today, in contemporary Christianity, it is said that "every man is a Pope." Whereas a few generations ago, people asserted that the Bible alone had authority, today, that, too, has been overthrown. Each person is his own authority. And I will add, that if every person is his own authority, then there is no authority.



This is perhaps stated in an extreme way. We do have bosses in the work place, teachers in the classroom and other authorities. But as anyone in “authority” can confirm, such positions are under increasing pressure and scrutiny. They often have authority, only because they have *coercive* power. Authority that rests naturally with a person or position has virtually disappeared from our world.

I am fully sympathetic with the political place of democracy. It evolved as a means of addressing tyranny – though it is often quite ineffective in confronting modern leaders who tyrannize in the name of democracy (or the tyrannies of various “democracies” as they vanquish their foes at the ballot box). But I offer no political suggestions in this article and have no interest in a conversation on the topic.

I am, however, deeply interested in the *spiritual disease* that accompanies the *interiorizing* of the democratic project. We have not only structured our political world in a “democratic” manner, we have spiritualized the concept and made of it a description for how the world truly *is* and how it *should* be. The assumptions of democracy have become the assumptions of modern morality and the matrix of our worldview. It is this *interiorization* of democracy that makes the Centurion impossible in our time.

People of the modern world have a sense of *inherent* equality, and often resent any assertion of authority. Of course, equality is true in a certain manner, and utterly false in another. It is true that all people have equal worth – no one life is more valuable than another. But by almost any other measure, we are not equal, because we are not commensurate. I am of equal worth, but I am not as smart as another. I am of equal worth but I am not as talented, or handsome, or wealthy, skilled, or wise, etc. Apparently, intelligence, talent, beauty, skill, wealth and the like are not the proper standards of comparison when we speak of equality. But our interior *sense* of equality often makes us assert equality where none exists.

This is particularly true in the spiritual life. I am sometimes told, “I do not need to confess my sins to a priest. I can pray directly to God.” A young man said this to me recently and added, “The Bible says we should only confess to God.” I pointed out to him that he was actually incorrect, that in its only mention of confession, the Bible says we should confess our sins “to one another.” He was surprised and dismayed.

The Scriptures also speak of elders and leaders and obedience and respect and many other things that have no place within the spirit of democracy. The young man’s mistake was to think that the Bible affirmed his democratic world-view. But the Scriptures belong to the world of the Roman Centurion.



Much of what today passes for Protestantism is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is a thinly veiled cloak for the democratic spirit at “prayer.” “Salvation by grace through faith” is a slogan for *individualism*, a Christianity “by right.” There are no works, no requirements, only a “grace-filled” *entitlement*. For the ultimate form of democracy is the person who needs no one else: no Church, no priest, no sacrament, only the God of my understanding who saves me by grace and guarantees that I can do it alone.

Our outward forms of Christianity are morphing as quickly as the market can imagine them. Even the “New Atheist” Sunday meetings differ little from many Christian gatherings. God Himself may not be necessary to the spirituality of our democracy. Where does God fit in a world of equals?

The classical world of Orthodox Christianity is profoundly undemocratic. It holds that the universe and everything that exists is *hierarchical*. This teaching is not an artifact of an older patriarchy (a typical democratic critique), but an essential part of the Christian gospel. For if Jesus is *Lord*, then the universe has a Lord. Democratic spirituality distrusts all hierarchy – anything that challenges the myth of equality is experienced as a threat. “Jesus never said anything about...”

The veneration of saints, the honoring of icons and relics, the place held by the Mother of God are deeply offensive to modern democracy. The complaints heard by those who reject such things are quite telling. It is rarely the classical protest of true iconoclasts that are heard. Rather, it is the modern declaration, “I don’t need anyone between myself and God.” It is the universal access to God, without interference, without mediation, without hierarchy, without sacrament, ultimately without any need for others that is offended by the hierarchical shape of classical Christianity.

A spiritual life without canon, without custom, without tradition, without rules, is the ultimate democratic freedom. But it unleashes the tyranny of the individual imagination. For with no mediating tradition, the modern believer is subject only to his own whim. The effect is to have no Lord but the God of his own imagination. Even his appeal to Scripture is without effect – for it is his own interpretation that has mastery over the word of God. If we will have no hierarchy, we will not have Christ as Lord. We cannot invent our own model of the universe and demand that God conform.

I should add, parenthetically, that, despite our democratic sentiments, the universe is inherently hierarchical. We can imagine ourselves as utterly individualized and autonomous, without the need for others, but this is make-believe. If we throw off the true structures and hierarchies of God’s creation, we will only discover other masters who are democratic in character. The “gods” of our own making are never less than madness itself.

It is a great spiritual accomplishment to not be “conformed to this world.” The ideas and assumptions of modern consumer democracies permeate almost every aspect of our culture. They become an unavoidable part of our inner landscape. Only by examining such assumptions in the light of the larger Christian tradition can we hope to remain faithful to Christ in the truth. Those who insist on the absence of spiritual authority, or demand that nothing mediate grace will discover that their lives serve the most cruel master of all – the spirit of the age.

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